

Letters to the Editor



On Rufous-naped Lark *Mirafra africana* 'flapping' display

In their most interesting paper on the birds of Pic de Fon in Guinea, Demey & Rainey (2004) described a displaying male of Rufous-naped Lark *Mirafra africana* (race *henrici*) 'jumping up vertically c.80 cm off the ground with rattling wings'. They believe this behaviour had not been described previously in the species, citing in support (among others) Keith *et al.* (1992).

We have come across this wing-noise display in several races of this lark, most notably in the race *nyikae* on the Nyika Plateau, Malaŵi-Zambia, where birds perform such displays quite regularly in the breeding season (observations over our several years of residence there in the 1980s, and also on a shorter visit in November–December 1977). On 5 December 1977, FD-L tape-recorded the noise produced by the wings of a jumping bird, a 'short burst of sound much like that made by the lark *Mirafra rufocinnamomea*' (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 1978: 142). We also mentioned in the same paper that similar 'flapping' behaviour was noticed occasionally by D. R. Aspinwall in individuals of other races on the southern Zambian plateau. In addition RJD (unpubl.) noted it in the montane race *nigrescens* on the Kitulo Plateau of southern Tanzania. The height of the jumps is usually quite short, a few cm to perhaps just under 1 m.

Of *M. africana malbranti* in the Kasai (Congo-Kinshasa), Chapin (1953: 47) wrote: '...Vincent observed the courting flight of a male, shooting up repeatedly from the ground to about 30 feet, where it "burred" with its wings, gave a tri-syllabic whistle, and came gliding down

with wings up-raised and legs out-stretched'. The height of the flapping wing display described by Vincent is much higher than in our experience of the species: in April 1996, on the Téké Plateau of Congo-Brazzaville, FD-L saw at least one lark of the same race *malbranti* display with the usual short vertical jump.

Of southern African birds, Maclean (1993: 427) wrote: '...between every 3–5 phrases, birds raises [*sic*] body on straight legs (or even lifts slightly off perch) as wings rattled, phrrrp...'. Skead (1995: 464–467) detailed many instances of similar 'clapping' in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, although it is clear that the song was usually not accompanied by wing-snapping. 'Clapping' was usually on the ground or up to 3 m high, but on one occasion the bird flew up in the air to some 15 m 'on slow beating but clapping wings'. Birds at times returned to the ground 'holding the feet hanging below the body'.

To be fair, Keith *et al.* (1992) had referred to this on p.23: 'wings often flapped during song, producing rattled phrrrp'. Demey & Rainey (2004) did not associate this description to what they saw in Guinea because the vertical jump was not mentioned (R. Demey pers. comm.). Nevertheless, with or without a noticeable vertical jump, this type of display seems quite widespread in the species, although it had not previously been reported for West African *henrici*.

References

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F. Dowsett-Lemaire and R. J. Dowsett, *Le Pouget, 30440 Sumène, France*.
E-mail: Dowsett@aol.com.

On São Tomé Grosbeak *Neospiza concolor*

In 2001, while working for the Bird Group of the Natural History Museum in Tring, I circulated a photograph of what was then believed by me (and others) to be a specimen of São Tomé Grosbeak *Neospiza concolor*. My comments concerning this apparently second known specimen have since entered the literature (Fry & Keith 2004, *The Birds of Africa*. Vol. 7: 530). However, further investigations into this data-less, mounted specimen of rather poor condition, which is housed in the Naturkundemuseum Bamberg (Germany), revealed that those colleagues commenting on the photo, and myself, were mistaken. The specimen has now been identified as being a Black-throated Grosbeak *Saltator (Pitylus) fuliginosus* from Brazil (cf. Dickinson

2003, *Complete Checklist of the Birds of the World*: 824). Therefore, still only one specimen of *Neospiza concolor* is extant, housed in the Natural History Museum, Tring, registered BMNH 1891.8.20.14 (cf. Knox & Walters 1994, *Br. Ornithol. Cl. Occ. Publ.* 1:

258). *Neospiza concolor* and *Saltator (Pitylus) fuliginosus* have, in fact, very similar bill shapes (though they differ in colour in live birds) and agree in most body proportions. Currently, they are treated within two different families (Dickinson 2003: 749:

Fringillidae / 824: Cardinalidae). I apologise for any confusion that my earlier comments might have caused.

Frank D. Steinheimer, Sylter Strasse 18, D-90425 Nürnberg, Germany. E-mail franksteinheimer@yahoo.co.uk

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